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## ABSTRACT

The call for more effective teaching in history classrooms reflects lessons learned from more than a decade of educational reform efforts that occurred throughout the late 1980s and 1990s. The belief today is that teachers need to have a strong background in content knowledge and concurrent skills to convey an expanding information base to a diverse student population in increasingly challenging classrooms. To address these ongoing instructional issues, and to improve student learning outcomes in U.S. history, a comprehensive three year professional development plan for elementary, middle, and high school U.S. history teachers was designed by a large urban school district in the southwestern United States. Implemented in spring 2002, the goals of this effort center on improving the conceptual understanding and presentation of information by U.S. history teachers. It also sought to positively impact the academic achievement and historical understanding of students in grades 5, 8, and 11, where the required social studies curriculum content is U.S. history. Through implementing the goals, this project seeks to deal with the issues of studying history and understanding the practice of historical investigation. To attain its stated goals the project employs professional development strategies to deepen teachers' understanding of U.S. history, to improve the quality of their instructional delivery, to integrate technology into instruction, and to engage students into a more active study of U.S. history. This paper reports on the project design, implementation strategies, and assessment results after its initial year of operation. (Contains 13 references.) (BT)

**A First Stage Analysis of a Professional Development Program for Elementary,  
Middle School, and Secondary United States History Teachers**

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**A paper presented to the annual meeting of the American Educational Research  
Association, Chicago, Illinois, April, 2003**

## **A First Stage Analysis of a Professional Development Program for Elementary, Middle School, and Secondary United States History Teachers**

### **Overview:**

Over the past decade there has been a renewed argument about the type of national history that should be taught in our country's public schools (Cornbleth, 2002). A significant segment of this debate has focused on how best to deliver an understanding of content knowledge of United States History to students, at all instructional levels, as well as the parallel ability to apply this subject matter effectively. This has evolved as mastery of conceptual frameworks became of paramount importance in learning paradigms and instructional outcomes in U.S. History classrooms.

This call for more effective teaching in history classrooms reflects lessons learned from more than a decade of educational reform efforts that occurred throughout the late 1980's and 1990's. These attempts at changing teaching and learning constructs led to the conclusion that to improve America's schools teachers, in all subject areas, needed to effectively understand and apply their content fields within their classroom assignments (e.g. National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, 1996, U.S. Department of Education, 2000). Indeed, as the Bradley Commission on History in Schools (1987) noted "the most important ingredient in any instructional situation is the individual teacher."

Concurrent to these findings the changing demographics of the national student body and increased expectations for all students have also led us, as a country, to demand more of teachers. As such, there is a belief that today's teachers need to have both a strong background in content knowledge and concurrent skills to convey an expanding information base to a diverse student population in increasingly challenging classrooms (Gregg and Leinhardt, 2002). While these issues present themselves in all subject fields they are particularly prevalent in United States History as it is taught more often, at a variety of grade levels, and is a "nation-wide" requirement for both elementary and high school graduation.

Dating from the mid 1980's there have been various reports noting the wide variance in student performance on tests measuring knowledge about United States History (e.g. National Center for Educational Statistics, 1996; Ravitch and Finn, 1987). Many of these indicate a decline in knowledge while others note student understanding of United States History as not much different than previous generations (Whittington, 1991). Despite these differences all agree that the key to increasing student comprehension of history resides in improvement in instruction and increased student utilization of historical knowledge (U.S. Department of Education, 2000). This is of extreme importance if we expect our students to use history as "an avenue to reach an understanding of ourselves and of our society, in relation to the human condition over time" (Bradley Commission, 1987).

## **Study/Project:**

To address these on-going instructional issues, and to improve student learning outcomes in United States History, a comprehensive three-year professional development plan for elementary, middle, and high school United States History teachers was designed by a large urban school district in the Southwestern United States. Implemented in Spring, 2002, the goals of this effort center on both improving the conceptual understanding and presentation of information by United States history teachers as well as positively impacting the academic achievement and historical understanding of students in grades 5, 8, and 11 where the required social studies curriculum content is United States history. In doing so this project seeks to deal with the issues of not just studying history but understanding the practice of historical investigation (VanSledright, 2002).

To attain its stated goals the project utilizes various professional development strategies to deepen teachers' understanding of United States History, to improve the quality of their instructional delivery, to integrate technology into instruction and to engage students into a more active study of United States History.

This paper reports on the project design, implementation strategies, and assessment results after its initial year of operation.

## **Site/Demographics:**

The site for this project is an inner city school district in a large city in the southwestern part of the United States. The district has more than 100 schools and is comprised of over 55,000 students. Hispanics (83%) and African Americans (12%) dominate its demographic profile. Over 89% of its population receive free or reduced meals. A large number of its children (15%) are recent immigrants who have limited English language proficiency.

Its students, as part of state curricular requirements, are required to study United States History in the fifth, eighth, and eleventh grades. Both eighth and eleventh grade instruction is conducted in a traditional single classroom mode while U.S. History in fifth grade is part of a broad based elementary education sequence of study that emphasizes reading and mathematics.

Many of the district's secondary history teachers, meaning those at the eighth and eleventh grades, in this district (27%) are teaching "out of field". This means that they are teaching one class as part of their teaching assignment in an area that they not certified to teach. Of those certified to teach history only 18% hold history only teaching certification. The rest hold composite social studies certificates or only minored in history meaning they have 12 undergraduate hours (four classes) in their teacher preparation program.

In addition, none of the fifth grade teachers in the district has either a history or social studies major. Most of these teachers (92%) hold elementary generalists or reading certification.

First year's participants represent all of the district's high schools, middle schools as well as thirty percent of its elementary schools. Teachers from all of the district's high schools, middle schools and elementary schools will eventually participate in the project over its three-year time frame.

## **Training Model**

The "training model" design that will be used throughout the three-year project engages an "expert" to deliver content material. Here an "expert" is characterized as someone who has proven knowledge in United States History through their teaching or publication prowess or is part of a nationally recognized "history content team" such as History Alive or the National Council for History Education.

This is then followed with content deepening theory training about important historical issues such as the role that the Constitution has played throughout United States History.

Next a supervised trial of new skills gained from these sessions with associated feedback on performance and coaching within the workplace occurs. Here the model emphasizes improvement in teachers' thinking and perspectives on historical ideas as well as the use of interactive teaching strategies to enhance student learning and performance.

This schema also incorporates a "vertical team" plan. That is, the teacher participants are grouped by high school "feeder patterns." Here fifth grade, eighth grade, and eleventh grade history instructors whose schools "feed" into each other, working as teams, are shown connections to historical themes that spiral throughout their curriculums. This is also an attempt to introduce and reinforce on-going historical concepts.

Another component of this model is the requirement that each of the teachers receiving professional development return to their home campus and "coach" instructors, not exposed to the training, in the ideas introduced to them. The district's plan is that through these interactions all history teachers will use these notions.

Within the professional development sessions each of the teams are provided broad overviews of major ideas and themes in United States history. The participants examine, discuss, and analyze these in both large and small groups. They are then provided with pedagogical constructs to implement these in their classrooms. Included in the themes discussed during the first year's training was:

- United States History prior to 1877
- United States History after 1877
- The American Revolution – using Habits of Mind and the Bradley Commission Report
- The United States Constitution – using Habits of Mind and the Bradley Commission Report

In succeeding years these content areas will be augmented and broadened to include a variety of topics such as civil rights, the seeds of the cold war, women's rights and the Fall of the Berlin Wall and collapse of Communism in the Soviet Union.

The professional development seminar series began in January 2002 and concluded in April. Teachers then participated in three-day colloquia on the American Revolution in June delivered by the National Council for History. This was followed training sessions on the History Alive curriculum.

### **Technology Training**

A substantial portion of first year instructional training also involved the incorporation of technology as part of a teacher's lesson repertoire. Learning how to integrate technology, using web-based resources, and emerging technologies as teaching tools are part of all professional development experiences. In addition instruction on how to use PBS videos and internet sites to support the content and conceptual frameworks provided by content emphasis was also present. The theme "technology training/application and engagement" was permeated these experiences.

### **Research Design:**

To determine the effects of the training interventions a pre-post design was employed to examine the impact of the program on participating teachers as well as changes that occurred in the schools (e.g., learning environments, instructional practice, partnerships and expectations) and on student learning outcomes.

Data collected include a review of a pre-post test instrument to assess the knowledge, skill and awareness levels of history of students, as well as their perceptions about history. Additional information was also gathered through attitudinal surveys about history from both teachers and students. Appropriate analytical procedures were used to answer evaluate responses (e.g., tests of statistical significance, content analyses).

Classroom observations and interviews provide the main sources of qualitative data. Nonparticipant observation (Bogdan & Bilken, 1982) was used to obtain firsthand accounts of how teachers infuse the constructs that have been presented to them in their classes. Interviews then followed that elicited information on instructional decision making. Data analysis was guided by a naturalistic research paradigm (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and involved developing interpretative cases.



In addition various teacher made classroom materials such as syllabi, teacher made tests, and lesson plans that directly effect daily instruction were also analyzed. This was done in a pre-post professional development exposure mode.

### **Findings:**

The data that has been collected and reviewed can provide only a preliminary, first-year, look at the effects of intervention activities given that this is a three-year project. However, these early findings do provide some insight into teacher instructional expertise and needs student attitudes about history and student achievement.

### **Teacher Data:**

A major focus of this project focuses on professional development presentations. Based on interviews and questionnaire responses over 60% of the teachers felt there was "an over emphasis" on historical content to the detriment of pedagogy in the first series of professional development activities. They noted that "while the information given to them was both informative and interesting" they needed to know how to deliver the material as well as how to better engage their students in classroom activities.

In addition teachers also noted they had very little experience in developing lessons beyond a basic level of knowledge acquisition. Most indicated that before participating in this project they had never been required to teach critical thinking or analytic skills. Preparation for state mandated tests dominated teacher lessons at all instructional levels in this district often to the detriment of both content application and critical thinking modes.

An initial examination of teacher made materials including teacher made tests suggested that these assessments had a very low level in expectation of student performance and were primarily focused on recall of information. This was true even for the open ended assignments (essay/short answer) which tended to require "pat" answers rather than any "higher level" thinking. While these tests may reflect prevailing state accountability measures and mandated curriculum they also suggest that these measures are influencing teachers towards instruction that is content focused without much regard to notions of the use of inquiry, decision making, or critical thinking skills pedagogy.

After engaging in project activities there were changes in these materials primarily through the incorporation of "canned" lessons provided by presenters. This was an adjustment in the level and difficulty of assignments and provided students with alternative learning scenarios.

As previously noted none of the elementary school teachers in this district has a degree in history or social studies. History preparation at this level is most often limited to the required 12 hours in government and history for all teacher certificate candidates. Most middle and secondary school teachers have majored in history or have a social studies

composite certificate that requires them to have a minimum of 12 hours in history. This same pattern held as new teachers were hired.

The inability of teachers to understand how to design and deliver lessons that incorporate high levels of content and interactive pedagogy may be a result of these hiring practices.

Teachers also noted that despite interesting and informative lessons on technology they could not incorporate these ideas due to the inability of the district's hardware systems. They did note that the project's web-page was providing an excellent mechanism for providing information and discussing problems.

### **Student Data:**

All students in this district are required to take state-mandated tests in United States history at the eighth grade and in the eleventh grade. Eighth grade test results, over the past five years, have been consistently twenty to twenty-five percent below the state average. While the eleventh grade results are better this district still lags behind the state average scores in U.S. History by more than 10%. Only two high schools in this district have scored above the state level on U.S. History assessments since 1999.

In the year that this project has been implemented eighth graders passing the assessment have increased by 12% from 57% passing to 69% passing while the state average only increased 7% from 76% passing to 83% passing. However, district eleventh grade students passing end of the course tests dipped 3% from 63% passing to 60%. This paralleled an overall drop in scores in U.S. History at the state level from 75% passing to 74% passing.

In addition to the state-mandated assessments data was also gathered from 200 middle and high school students who responded to a questionnaire on their views and attitudes about history. At all grade levels students understood the need to learn about history but did not see its application to their daily lives. In addition, they had difficulty in seeing how history related to other school subjects. Many expressed boredom with teaching practices while others felt that their teachers were ill prepared.

### **Conclusions:**

This project seeks to fundamentally change the way United States History is taught and assessed in all elementary, middle, and high schools in a school district of over 50,000 students in a three year period. While admirable, the systemic nature of this reform effort is daunting at best. Trying to overcome historic hiring patterns that have not provided this district a cadre of teachers who are trained in developing and presenting history lessons in critical thinking modalities and at the same time increase the numbers of students who pass state mandated tests are difficult tasks.



In its first year the project sought to attack this problem through a professional development sequence that was dominated by presentations from professional historians and a nationally developed curriculum. While responding well to these the teachers quickly recognized that content instruction was only part of the answer in seeking change. They requested, early on, that knowledge on how to apply the content they were being exposed to was important if students were to see the relevance of the material. Given student attitudes about history this is, and will continue to be an important element if this project is to succeed.

While student score on state mandated assessments increased appreciably at the eighth grade level it is not clear what effect the project, as an academic intervention, had on the results. Certainly they were a positive attribute given that there were increases in all of the middle schools but the extent of this is open to question as the teachers were only exposed to new materials and instructional strategies for a brief period of time before the assessments were given.

Perhaps a more important indicator of implementation is the manner in which teachers are incorporating the information and applications that has been presented to them in their individual classrooms. At this point many are using "ready made" lessons as they deem appropriate. Some, mostly high school teachers, have begun to develop their own materials.

As VanSledright (2002) notes there are few studies of interventions based in classrooms based on curricular reform recommendations. As this project unfolds it will provide an insight into an attempt at systemic reform in history classrooms.

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